ALIKE AT WORK AND PRAYER

September 4, 1988, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Ecclestiastes 2:18-25
Luke 10:1-12

"There is nothing better for a man then that he should eat and drink, and find enjoyment in his toil." -Ecclestiastes 2:24 (RSV)

"There is nothing better for a man
(or woman) then that they should eat
and drink and find enjoyment in their
toil." Ecclesiastes 2:24

The topic today is work. Our starting point is the Gospel lesson: Jesus sending out a group of disciples to announce the nearness of God's Kingdom, his allusion to labor and wages and the rather crisp job description he gave them.

But for a text I have reached back several centuries before Christ to one of the most enigmatic books in the Bible, Ecclesiastes. The name is of its author, actually, a philosopher, who is trying to discover the meaning of human existence.

We know him primarily because of the lovely third chapter...

"For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven..."

But, essentially, Ecclesiastes is a cynic. "There is nothing new under the sun... all is vanity," he concludes.

In the pursuit of the good life he tries pleasure, power, wealth, wisdom (sounds like he lives in Lincoln Park) but nothing works.

And then he lingers, almost wistfully, over the topic of work...

"There is nothing better for a man or woman then that they should eat and drink and find enjoyment in their toil."

One thing is certain: the topic gets our attention. There is, in fact, no more relevant subject. Work is what we do with most of our time. Deciding what to do, what field to choose, what profession to join, is one

of the two or three major decisions we make. And the truth is that more and more it is a decision that does not stay made. People today change jobs and professions several times during their working careers. We talk about our work, worry about our future, fret about our relationships with fellow workers, supervisors or employees, lose sleep, feel stress and get ulcers over our work. Nothing about us so commands our energy, intelligence, imagination and love.

Philosopher Albert Camus observed: "Without work all life goes rotten. But when work is soulless, life stifles and dies." [William Willimon, The Christian Century, 9/2/83]

It is easy to romanticize work. In Studs Terkel's classic book, Working, a steelworker says: "My attitude is that I don't get too excited about my job. I do my work but I don't say whoopee-doo. The day I get excited about my job is the day I go to a headshrinker."

Before that, American novelist William Faulkner observed: "You can't eat for eight hours a day nor drink for eight hours a day nor make love for eight hours a day - all you can do for eight hours is work, which is the reason why man makes himself and everybody else so miserable and unhappy." [Ibid, William Willimon]

Someone defined a job as what we do to earn enough money so that we can enjoy the time when we are not working.

And so one of the idioms of the age which has entered the language is "TGIF" - "thank God it's Friday," which means simply, "I don't have to work for two days." The clergy version is "TGIM" - "Thank God it's Monday." And the title of a popular song so graphically defined what a singer wanted to do with his job that it would not be appropriate to repeat.

And yet, curiously, when they are asked, more than 80% of the American people say they would continue working even if they didn't have to. One of the things that happens to people who become suddenly wealthy, winning the lottery for instance, is that they quit working, with less than happy results.

The enigma goes on. At least part of what we mean by mid-life crisis is work related, or at least related to the urge to change jobs in a significant way and do something more purposeful. It is not uncommon, nor entirely whimsical, for fifty year olds to be talking about what they want to be when they grow up.

It seems we know intuitively that each of us has work to do and that the meaning of our lives is somehow related to our doing it. Elton Trueblood, Quaker theologian, spoke deeply to me when I heard him tell an audience years ago that "Your work is the only thing you really own: your effort, your labor, is all you have that is truly yours. All you have to give is your work."

Now, given the importance and relevance of the topic, one might wonder why the church has not paid more attention to it; why the life of the ordinary church, in the words of one C.E.O., "has absolutely nothing to

do with the place I spend the vast majority of my time." It is true. There is not much on the topic, our own very fine "Conference On The Workplace" nothwithstanding. In fact, most of the theological attention directed to the topic of work has more to do with what's wrong with it, why we shouldn't give our lives to it, how to avoid being obsessed about it, how to keep from working too hard and how to be intentional about leisure time. All of which is wonderful and necessary, but it still leaves us with the simple reality that come Monday morning, for most of our lives, most of us are going to get up early to head out to work and that what we do there will command the better part of our energy and creativity and strength. William Willimon quips: "Thank God Michelangelo had an obsessive need to work and that nobody counseled him out of it." [Ibid]

There are several reasons for the poverty of theological resources for working. The oldest is that one way to treat our most ancient story of creation is to conclude that work is what happens when you displease God. Adam and Eve were enjoying the leisure of the garden, a kind of Club Med on the Tigris-Euphratee, this interpretation goes, until they sinned, and then they had to go to work. Work as curse. Work as punishment. It's not the only way to treat the Genesis story, but it does provide a theological rationale for concluding that the more favored you are by God, the less work you need to do - i.e. a hierarchical social system in which the privileged are assumed by all to have been favored by God because they are privileged; thus making what they do important in God's economy, and what other people do unimportant and inconsequential.

Another reason is that the church has insisted that God calls the clergy to their tasks, without defining what that means and how it happens. The result is a popular, but more or less universal assumption that clergy hear voices telling them what to do with the rest of their lives... while the rest of the people make work decisions on the basis of what they want to do, or what the market will bear.

Another reason is that culturally, vocation often means profession and that means doctor, lawyer, nurse, teacher, social worker... still leaving out most of the human race.

Now, the irony is that one of the most dynamic and oldest Christian notions has to do with God's call to each of us and all of us.

The early Christian church believed that each person is called to be a child of God. Each has work to do and gifts to do it with.

The ministry, in our earliest experience, didn't refer to a profession but what the church does in the world, and the clergy's main function was to help the laity, "laos" in Greek - the whole people of God, get on with their ministry.

That can be very strong medicine. Can you imagine the personal, social, political and economic impact when a slave in the first century was told that God had given him special gifts and that it was his calling, his vocation, to use them? It is so strong, this Christian notion of vocation, that I believe we resist it - clergy and laity alike. It's more comfortable, after all, when clergy are called by God, accountable to God,

and the rest of the folk go their own way, supporting and applauding the clergy, of course. But it's corrupt. It's not Biblical and, most important, it is not relevant.

So - toward a new theology of work, relying on our particular notion of vocation.

An alternate treatment of the Genesis story which sees God as worker and creator, and proposes that God puts men and women in the garden to till it, not just to enjoy it in leisure but keep it in trim, pull weeds, plant, harvest, nurture its productivity, manage it responsibly. The alternate treatment is that God puts the all-too human beings out of paradise and into freedom, where they become human and enter history and where their toil is noble and necessary. Outside of Eden they become God's co-workers, co-creators. Outside of Eden they become parents, farmers, managers, politicians. A better theological choice than work as curse, it seems to me, is work as privilege and purpose. We were created to create, to join in the long evolutionary process of creation, to live responsibly and energetically and lovingly in this world for a few decades as God's fellow workers, leaving the place a little better, cleaner, more productive, safer than we found it.

This new notion of vocation begins with the radical Christian belief that God thoroughly loves this world, and that God's plans are for the transformation of this world; God's Kingdom is not some place apart from the world to which he calls his children, but the world transformed, by them, here and there, now and then, but ultimately everywhere. This notion is based on the radical Christian belief that God is attentive to every single human being. That God knows each person, gives each special gifts, has a purpose and a plan for each, calls each one of us to our work, our vocation.

That kind of thinking had enormous power in the first century. And it regained its power when it surfaced again, fifteen centuries later, in the middle of the Reformation. It was Martin Luther who recovered the idea that each Christian has a vocation, not just the clergy. Luther was a very devoted monk. No one worked harder at his vocation than Brother Martin. Luther left the monastery, not because it was too hard, however, but because he thought it was too easy. "The truly burdensome demands on the Christians, Luther argued, were made in the world, where they were challenged to apply their vision of faith and freedom..." ["Martin Luther on Christian Living," Hans J. Hillerbrand, Weavings, May/June 1988]

Luther, then the other reformers, proclaimed a radical new equality. A modern Anglican theologian put it this way: "All orders are holy. Plumbers are as much in holy orders as the clergy, serving God and their fellows. Electricians, parkkeepers, doctors, are all working as much with the things of God as the priest with the sacrament." [God's Frozen People, Gibbs and Martin, p. 16]

This new notion of vocation asserts that God needs us for the ongoing work of creation, not just the work of the church... not limited even to healing and helping. God doesn't want everybody to become a minister... God forbid! All can't be doctors and social workers. God needs us for the

ongoing work which sustains the life of the world he loves... steel workers, bus drivers, homemakers, street cleaners, farmers, technicians, brokers, clerks, bankers, soldiers, politicans, parents - all do God's work. The self-limitations of God require the hard work of men and women. God can't have a world by himself. There is a wonderful vignette attributed to Antonio Stradivari -

> "When any master holds twixt chin and hand a violin of mine, he will be glad that Stradivari lived. For while God gives them skill, I give them instruments to play on. God choosing me to help him... If my hand slacked I should rob God - leaving a blank instead of violins... he could not make Antonio Stradivari's violins without Antonio."

Part of our new theology of vocation, I suggest, should be the ministry of work well done. Among the gifts for which I am everlastingly grateful is the work of those who bore, nurtured, shaped and guided me. They worked hard, at jobs that were long and dirty and exhausting and dangerous. My guess is that many of us share that: We come from blue collar roots, our heritage is labor and hard work. Our fathers and mothers gave themselves, without much complaining, to work that offered little hope of significant advancement and not very much hope for significant change of life style. They got an occasional raise but life was not going to get much better. They lived by a work ethic that was and is precious. They knew what it means to be unemployed, to be victimized by economic forces completely beyond their control. When the economy slowed down they were the first to be layed off. They joined labor unions and fought for rights and benefits and safety and better working conditions and they remained loyal to the companies and corporations. I'm grateful for that and it seems appropriate on Labor Day to voice that gratitude.

And I'm grateful for the experience of learning the nobility of work done well at the hands of one of the most unforgettable characters I ever met, Raymond Frank, foreman, Altoona Dept. of Water, Sewers and Parks. He was from Bavaria originally, with an elementary school education, whose life was "doing it right and if it isn't right, starting over and getting it right." He worked, kept a garden, went to Mass, always chewed tobacco - told the summer college help that he could chew it during Low Mass, High Mass was more of a challenge - and taught me that there is a right way to do every job: chopping wood, digging a ditch, threading a pipe, pushing a broom, carrying a sack of concrete, laying a block, sawing a board... It was a great gift. Even if I failed to learn the skill itself, which was often the case, I learned to respect the truth that there is a right way: that doing it right is noble, whether it is hammering a nail or writing a sermon. And I conclude that it is what God wants as we join the process of creation for a few years.

When I got to seminary, I found the theological tradition out of which Raymond Frank had come... in one of the devotional classics, a little pamphlet entitled Practicing the Presence of God, by Brother Lawrence, a Carmelite monk in the 17th century. "Do all for the love of God," he said. He worked in the monastery kitchen. He explained: "It is too pitiful a way to love God and to know him by what books tell of him. We must quicken our faith. The time of action is not different from the time of prayer. I

enjoy God in the hurry of my kitchen. I put my little egg-cake into the frying pan for the love of God."

How fortunate when your vocation becomes your work. How blessed you are if you are able to earn a living doing what you are called to do, what your gifts, skills, hopes, dreams and priorities demand that you do. But it can't always be that way. Work is paying attention to what matters most, someone put it. "The art of living well is to accomplish one's job without diminishing the priority of one's work." [See Belden Lane, in Christian Century, 1/4/84, "A Reflection on Work"] Some have to hold down a job in order to be able to afford to do their work, in other words.

I worked in the auto industry one time, in a stamping plant, where large automobile parts are stamped and cut out of rolls of steel, along with a lot of other young men. We worked just long enough that the company would have had to make us permanent employees with full benefits the next week. Instead of that, they let us go - all of us - and hired a new crop. It was okay for me... Summer was over. But most of my co-workers were unemployed, and headed back to Kentucky and Tennessee. People who pontificate about vocation and the nobility of hard work, need to know about a development no one anticipated; not Adam Smith, not Thomas Jefferson or James Madison, or the writer of Ecclesiastes or Jesus of Nazareth; namely modern industrial capitalism driven by profit, which uses labor as a raw material, wants it as cheap as possible and which creates huge corporations - larger than nations.

My memories of the stamping plant are vivid, standing at a welding machine pushing a button which lowered a welding device onto a piece of metal, then pushing another button to weld, then moving the piece along, eight hours a day. Hard to feel much about that. We had two 12 minute breaks a day. Mine often came at 7:10 a.m., ten minutes after I started. Our line over-stayed one morning by about five minutes; we were caught and in the process of being dismissed when the union representative interceded. For the rest of the morning I watched a laboratory demonstration of modern American labor relations as the two sides shouted obscenities at each other. Later that day, back at work, one of my fellow workers shoved the piece of metal we were welding through the maze of hoses and wires and our line was out of commission the rest of the shift. I remember lunch box searches on the way out of the plant and occasionally personal searches for stolen tools. I don't recall anybody feeling anything more noble about the company than antipathy, and mostly it was deep antagonism. I hope it's better today. I have a sense that what I experienced twenty-five years ago is part of the reason most of the cars in our parking lot are imports. My point is that a new theology of vocation must take into account the reality that for many work is not wonderful and can be demeaning, dehumanizing and necessary.

A new theology of vocation must either help redefine that work, or with responsible integrity suggest that our vocation - our real work - might have to happen elsewhere.

Our new theology of work should include a commitment to live under the guidance of our Lord's commandment to love and serve, to give an hour's work for an hour's pay, to respect fellow employees, and our employers.

There are larger implications. If we are called to join God in the work of creation part of it is the political determination that there will be jobs for those who need and want them. Which means that quite apart from economics, there is a price tag attached to unemployment and underemployment that is far more dear than a few points of inflation.

Part of it is to insist that rewards are commensurate with value. That means that school teachers and social workers have to receive more money, and that means you and I have to be willing to pay more taxes. It also means, modestly, that we ought to reward hard work. Try doubling your tips for those whose work serves you: try respecting instead of scorning the youngster who offers to shine your shoes or wash your car - and who is a true practitioner of free enterprise.

God so loved the world that he gave his only son. A new notion of vocation begins with God's love for you. Jesus believed and taught that the hairs on your head are numbered; that God knows you by name and has plans for you. You are a person whom God loves and cares about.

God has work for you to do. God has a purpose for your life. God has given you your mind, your strength, your creativity, your special skills. Regardless of their nature, or dimension, they are yours alone. No one else has them. When you measure your gifts; when you know what God has given you, you are on your way to discovering your work, your vocation, your calling.

The question remains...

Has God called me and I didn't hear it?

What does it sound like when God calls?

May I suggest that our dearest and perhaps most important and revolutionary notion is that God does have a purpose for you and for me.

May I suggest, further, that we put away notions that God speaks in a voice like Charlton Heston... and tells us what school to attend and what firm to join and what securities to buy. Without denigrating in any way those for whom those notions have meaning, may I suggest that they are the reason most of us don't understand our own vocation. We're waiting for the voices.

May I suggest that God calls you... through the questions you ask and cannot avoid...

May I suggest that God's call comes to many of us as a persistent itch we can't quite scratch... that God calls us in a mystical sense that we are being pursued, relentlessly by a "Hound of Heaven."

May I suggest that God calls through the things that quicken you, that catch your breath and make your blood race: that God calls you when you have tears in your eyes and an unaccountable lump in your throat...

May I suggest that God calls you to your vocation by giving you gifts - skills, abilities, sensitivities - which are yours alone... And then, as a good and loving parent, waits for you to figure out how best to use them in the work of creation...

That is your vocation... alike at work and prayer.

God could not make a Stradivarius violin without Antonio.

God cannot do your work without you. No one can. You - only you can do your work - your vocation.

Amen.